

Producer Experience

Two Heifers, One Eye

Producer relates struggles with pinkeye.

by Joey Kubesch

A miracle took place last summer at Goodenough Farm in Peru, Ind., where Jim Smith and I raise Angus cattle. The spring, summer and fall of 2005 brought to our registered Angus herd a long-term, worrisome outbreak of pinkeye. Common in cattle, pinkeye — or infectious bovine keratoconjunctivitis — is an inflammation of the conjunctiva, the covering of the eyeball and inside of the eyelid.

In past years, we had occasionally seen isolated cases of it, but never anything like the summer of 2005. It seemed like every beast displayed on at least one eye the milky haze that signaled the progression of the disease.

Excessive weeping is an early symptom, and flies continually clustered around the affected eyes, relentlessly spreading *Moraxella bovis*, the pinkeye organism, from cow to cow to calf and back.

The course of the disease runs four to eight weeks or more, and during that time, the animal will keep the affected eye closed due to a sensitivity to sunlight. This also makes it difficult to forage, and the animal typically drops weight.

Near the middle of the cornea, a round area erodes into an ulcer, and sometimes this ulcer is severe enough to eat through all layers of the eyeball. When this happens, the eye is blinded permanently. One of our heifers had two separate pinkeye infections and, ultimately, lost both eyes.

We tried to fight back

Between June and October, we had eight visits from our veterinarian, Steve Pilgrim, to inject Liquamycin® LA-200® into the eye margins as he dealt with the disease in our cows and calves.

We bought Rabon® blocks to sterilize fly eggs in manure, sticky strips to catch and immobilize flies, stinky potions to put in liquid traps, and pour-on potions to make the cows unpalatable to flies.

Nothing worked as hard as my credit card! Fellow cattle breeders suggested fly dope on mineral feeders and barn entry doors, but Purdue University's best ophthalmology advice, from Susan Rebar, was that very little had progressed in pinkeye prevention in many years.

Baby goes blind

Early one morning, I heard calf No. 9962 bawling. Her dam wouldn't "echo-locate" and help the baby find mom and milk. As I moved closer and watched the calf run to each fence and bump into it, working her way around the small lot in search of her mother, I realized "Helen Keller" was blind.

Meanwhile, another heifer had one eye badly inflamed. In the later stages of the ulceration of the eye, the iris and possibly the lens will protrude through. This is what had occurred in the second calf — the eye protruded beyond the ability of her eyelid to cover it and lubricate the eyeball.

We hauled the second heifer to Purdue University School of Veterinary Medicine to become the patient of Nicky Baird and senior student Casey Shake. Shake's ingenious suggestion to his mentor offered a potential vision-saving procedure — and a fall-back cosmetic result of leaving the eye in the heifer.

The procedure began with a four-point retrobulbar block, a local anesthetic to provide pain relief to the area. Shake then performed a line block on the upper and lower eyelids, desensitizing the area where the sutures would be placed. He injected the bulbar conjunctiva with penicillin and a corticosteroid, dexamethasone, providing the eye with an antibiotic and an anti-inflammatory medication to lessen swelling.

His next step was to make a small vertical incision in the cornea for drainage of fluids. Then he removed some scar tissue on the cornea, which had

been caused by the pinkeye infection. Shake's final step was to suture the upper and lower eyelids together so that the eye would be closed, and he gave a dose of Banamine® for pain relief. At the 14-day checkup, the inflammation was nearly gone. Sight in the affected eye was lost, as we expected, but the eye itself was saved, preventing emptiness of the socket.

Seeing-eye guide

The true wonder occurred when weaning time arrived. "Elle," the second heifer, without provocation, tutoring or inducement from us, has taken on the job of being the lead animal to the less fortunate heifer. The single eye that she still had enabled her to take on the job of nursemaid to her blind herdmate, Helen.

In bad weather, at feeding time or carrot treat visits, the sighted heifer goes to pick up her pasture pal and guides her in. Together they come to the barn. The phenomenon continues to amaze us. With the one eye between them, they have become a stronger force than either could be alone. They are able to forage for feed and water and to move around the lots at will. Rather than starving to death, they will both become healthy, if handicapped, cows, a unit of two rather than of one.

Being a terribly softhearted person, I convinced my partner to let me continue this experimental "buddy system" for raising these two future brood cows. I'm betting we'll see both adult bovines groomed well by mutual "cowlicking" under the same shade tree and munching the same area of our pasture throughout their lives.

Editor's Note: This personal experience was provided by Indiana producer Joey Kubesch. If you have an experience you think other readers would benefit from your sharing, send your article of 850 words or less to Editor Shauna Hermel at shermel@angusjournal.com. Please use "Producer Experience" in the subject line of your e-mail.

